

Pacifism and Anti-Militarism in the Period Surrounding the Birth of the State of Israel

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on groups and individuals who promoted the ideological options of anti-militarism and pacifism in the period immediately preceding the birth of the State of Israel and during its first decade. It presents the struggles of the Ihud group against the spreading of the Masada myth and positioning the IDF at the center of the Israeli collective cognition and of the Organization of War Resisters in Israel against the universal conscription and legal negation of the conscientious objection option. It sheds light on the long-forgotten absolute pacifism of two individuals—Natan Hofshi and Yosef Abilea—who were involved in the above organizations but also preached against what they saw as the dangerous taking over of the militaristic state of mind in the late pre-state days and early statehood.

IN CONTRAST TO MANY OTHER COUNTRIES AND SOCIETIES, NO SIGNIFICANT pacifist or anti-militaristic movement has ever emerged in Israel.¹ Any number of reasons may account for this fact,² from the predominant presence of the ongoing conflict with the Arab world in general and the Palestinians in particular, to the absence of pacifist or anti-militaristic principles in traditional Jewish religion and culture.³ Although there is disagreement in Israel regarding when and how the army and military force should be used, there is not today, nor has there ever been, any real public debate over the very legitimacy of the army. In fact, numerous studies have demonstrated the hegemony of the army and militarism in various aspects of the reality of Israel, including politics,⁴ economics,⁵ social affairs,⁶ education,⁷ culture,⁸ and gender issues.⁹

The article sheds light on the existence of groups and individuals who promoted the ideological option of anti-militarism or pacifism in the period immediately preceding the birth of the State of Israel and during its first decade. They issued public warnings claiming that if preventive measures were not taken, militarism would consume everything good in Israeli society and turn the country into a Sparta of the Middle East. Such a Sparta, they predicted, would wage, and even initiate, incessant devastating wars with its neighbors. They also warned that the dominance of the military and involvement in continuous warfare would become fertile soil for the evolution of a morally defected society that would turn its back on the age-old Jewish tradition of “not by might, nor by power”.

I take no stance with respect to the moral or political merit of anti-militaristic and pacifist views. The primary aim here is to “dust off” an important yet forgotten argument with obvious relevance for the present discourse over the place of the army in a democratic Jewish state.

The article is based on the premise that with respect to the issue of the army and thereby of anti-militarism, the change in status from a Jewish community to a sovereign state brought with it a profound change. Until its final day, the pre-state community, the Yishuv, was a voluntary association. On the other hand, from the moment Israel declared its independence and received international recognition as a sovereign state, the Jewish community became an entity with the right and ability to impose its laws on all its citizens. Thus, in the Yishuv, groups and individuals whose views deviated from the mainstream had the right and practical possibility of conducting themselves as they wished without incurring any legal sanctions. Once the state was founded, however, such disobedience would automatically result in severe sanctions. Even beyond the legal ramifications, it is clear that in a voluntary collective, non-conformist groups and individuals can more easily distance themselves, both mentally and practically, from the mainstream. Rhetoric of this sort was indeed employed by several minority groups in the Yishuv, including the ultra-Orthodox, the various revisionist groups, and associations promoting atypical ideologies, such as *Ihud*, which, contrary to the Yishuv leadership, advocated a bi-national rather than a Jewish sovereign state.¹⁰ On the other hand, citizens of a sovereign state feel a mental and emotional responsibility, even if they do not bear legal responsibility, for its policies and actions.

The awareness that all the citizens of the state, whatever their personal views or group affiliations, would be morally and practically accountable for its actions, led the small number of anti-militarists and pacifists to voice their opinions more forcefully immediately before and after the

establishment of the State. Alongside the mainstream, who saw the army as an essential means of defense in a hostile region, as well as a sign of the national “normalization”,¹¹ there were those who believed that militarism ran counter to political logic, universal morality, and Jewish tradition. In their concern for the adverse political and moral implications of establishing a regular army, some were even willing to forego independence.

As these people constituted only a small minority, they did not attract much attention, either at the time or in later historical analyses of the period. Several explanations may account for their absence from the research literature. The most significant explanation is the status of the army in Israel. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), from the moment of independence, became, and to a large extent remains, one of the entities that not only enjoys the largest consensus in Jewish Israeli society, but also serves to unify it.

There appear to be grounds for the claim that faith in the army and militarism as central national values has declined considerably, as has the view that war is an effective and legitimate means for settling international conflicts. Thus, recent years have evidenced a rise in the number of conscientious objectors who have used the legal arena afforded them by military authorities to expound their ideology.¹² Yet even the young conscientious objectors do not rely on any past history, most likely because the pre-state debate has been totally erased from the collective memory. Post-state precedents for conscientious objection on anti-militaristic or pacifist grounds have also been forgotten. These include the case of the attorney Amnon Zichroni who refused to serve in the army in 1954, went on a hunger strike, and was brought to trial and ultimately released from military duty. Uri Davis similarly waged a lengthy battle against the military authorities in 1961–63, refusing to wear a uniform or bear arms.¹³ These incidents seem to have disappeared from the collective memory as a result of a voluntary decision to limit public debate in Israel, and turned military service into the primary ticket into society (and politics).

ANTI-MILITARISM IN THE PERIOD SURROUNDING INDEPENDENCE

The following discussion focuses on two groups, the more familiar Ihud and the almost unheard of Organization of War Resisters in Israel (OWRI). In addition, we will consider two individuals, Natan Hofshi and Yosef Abilea, who worked both within organized groups and independently to disseminate their personal objections to war of any kind.

IHUD

Ihud, founded in 1942, supported a bi-national solution to the Jewish–Arab struggle for control over the Land of Israel/Palestine. The group devoted its first five years to the attempt to derail the engine that was racing toward the establishment of a Jewish state, a solution they believed would lead to the perpetuation of violent conflict. The Partition Plan of 1947, followed by the outbreak of the War of Independence, dashed their hopes entirely. With the idea of bi-nationalism relegated to the trash can of history, the organization seemed doomed. They offered the following explanation for their failure to convince the Jewish public of the value of a bi-national solution:

Our youngsters have been brought up in “light” of the destruction of human civilization and humanity . . . How can they rely on Jewish–Arab brotherhood as a solution to problems when they see throughout the world only hatred and betrayal . . . Even Gandhi and Nehru and Mandela failed, although they were infinitely better equipped than us in terms of both organization and financing.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the group continued to conduct limited activities, turning its attention to the effort to minimize the damage of Jewish independence on political and educational fronts. Under the ideological leadership of the well-known philosopher Martin Buber, in January 1948, in the midst of Israel’s War of Independence, Ihud members sent a statement to the press condemning Jewish attacks on Arab passersby, which they saw as a result of a growing “psychosis of militarism”:

A psychosis of militarism is spreading among us, a psychosis of fear that causes every stranger—or anyone who looks like a stranger—to appear to be a criminal and a murderer, an aggressor and an enemy. . . . We appeal to the Jerusalem public, we appeal especially to our Jewish brothers: do not defile our name and our honor. If we too go the way of the incited mob, not only will we not achieve anything of value, but we will aggravate the situation, intensify the hatred, and provoke further indiscriminate and merciless responses.¹⁵

Ihud also sought to curb the entrenchment of what they termed “the spirit of Masada”, which in their opinion had come to define Jewish–Arab relations in Israel as a “zero-sum game” and glorified martyrdom:

We believe that the common symbolic view of the events at Masada is grounded in a falsification of historical facts which is misleading the young generation. Masada and the spirit of Masada are not typical of our nation, are not symbolic of our past, and cannot serve as the motto for our present.¹⁶

Such statements ran counter to prevailing opinion, and provoked those who were convinced they were on the right historical path. Shortly after the Arab attack on a convoy to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem in which 79 people were killed (13 April 1948), Ihud's leader, Prof. Judah Magnes¹⁷ sent a letter to the editor of *The Jerusalem Post* against the convoys to Mt. Scopus.¹⁸ He received the following response from Prof. Shimon Budenheimer of the Hebrew University:

The fateful time has come when our conscience can no longer tolerate the damage you and your group are causing to our existence and our project . . . It is my greatest hope that you will rethink your opinion and examine carefully whether at this time your place is with your nation fighting for its survival or in the camp of our bitter enemies.¹⁹

The declaration of the State of Israel on 14 May dealt a death blow to the Ihud. Two weeks later, its journal, *Baiyot Házman* [Problems of the Times], lamented what awaited the newly-born in the short term, and Judaism as a whole in the long term, as a result of what they saw as a blighted attempt to achieve instant Jewish sovereignty. As a small country in an alien geopolitical environment, Israel would be compelled to invest all its resources in arms and military operations, and would lose its Jewish essence because of the inevitable neglect of social and cultural endeavors. Gabriel Stern, one of Ihud's leading activists, defined 14 May as the victory of the "only thus" theory (the motto of the militaristic Etzel underground) and the slogan: "In blood and fire Judah fell, in blood and fire Judah will rise." He went even further, insisting: "At this very moment we must declare that this war was not necessary and that the thousands of sacrifices that have already fallen on its altar were in vain."²⁰ The escalation of the Jewish-Arab conflict into full-scale war with the Arab world in 1948–49 confirmed the worst of Ihud's fears. Even the victories in battle did not raise their spirits, "As members of Ihud, we do not welcome triumphs on the battlefield, which are in essence the spilling of blood, ruination, and destruction for everyone created in God's image."²¹

In the 1950s, apprehensions about the establishment of a Jewish army led Ihud to be especially alert to any signs of militaristic attitudes taking

root in the government, the public in general, and the IDF in particular. They believed there was a very real danger that army leaders in Israel would push civilian decision makers in the direction of excessive use of force, as had happened in many other new states that had gained independence in the post-colonial era. In response to the statement by Chief of Staff Yigael Yadin in April 1950 that Israel could expect a second round of warfare in the near future, Ihud declared: “Before we speak of a ‘second round of warfare’, we have to discuss whether the ‘first round’ was necessary, inevitable, or whether it could have been avoided.”²²

Ihud was also one of the only organizations in Israel to condemn the reprisal attacks that became more frequent toward the mid-‘50s. After the raid on the Jordanian village of Qibya in October 1953, the group issued a statement entitled “Our Conscience Cries Out!”, in which it denounced the murder of Israelis by Arab fedayeen and the murder of Arabs by the IDF in the same breath, and demanded that those involved in the reprisal attack be brought to trial.²³ In late 1955, with tensions in the region rising, they were among the very few groups in the country to appeal for every effort to be made to prevent the situation from deteriorating into another war, which they perceived not as a defensive action, but rather as a needless offensive. The resignation of PM Moshe Sharett and David Ben-Gurion’s resumption of the office confirmed for Ihud that they were right in claiming that militarism was taking hold in the country. When Sharett’s resignation was announced, posters bearing a statement by the group appeared on the walls of Jerusalem. Entitled “Where is the State of Israel Headed?” it declared, “Alas that Sharett is gone and Ben-Gurion remains . . . the general has driven out the statesman.”

When the Sinai Campaign broke out in late October 1956, Ihud openly decried the action. Most of their rage, however, was directed not at the military operation itself, but at the events in Kfar Kassem. The killing of 43 Israeli Arab civilians by the IDF was presented as irrefutable proof of their oft-repeated claim that the army was out of control. Rabbi Binyamin (Yehoshua Radler-Feldman), one of the central figures in Ihud who moved to Kfar Kassem for a short time to show his empathy with its residents, expressed his repulsion in the bluntest terms: “The action in Kfar Kassem is the fault of an extreme militaristic state, the fault of the spirit pervading it and enshrouding its body and soul.”²⁴

Very few remember the struggle of Ihud for the character of the new state. Moreover, Masada, for example, has become a national and military icon and a mindset with overwhelming influence over public discourse and perhaps, at given moments in history, over government policy as well.

These facts provide ample evidence of Ihud's failure in the political arena, yet contentions similar to theirs are again being raised today. Thus a retrospective look at the development of the discourse and practice in Israel over the years affords the analysis put forward by Ihud in the late '40s and early '50s a certain aura of prophesy.

ORGANIZATION OF WAR RESISTERS IN ISRAEL (OWRI)

Despite an extensive search of the academic literature, no mention whatsoever could be found of the pacifist league OWRI.²⁵ Founded in 1945 (although it only began operating in 1947), the group is still officially in existence, making it one of the oldest NGOs in Israel. It is an accredited chapter of War Resisters International (WRI), which also distinguishes it from most civilian organizations in Israel, as they tend to avoid affiliation with international associations lest their primary allegiance be questioned. This is certainly the case when the aims of the international body contradict a central value in Israeli society or government policy. Such a dilemma clearly emerges from the WRI charter, which states, *inter alia*: "War is a crime against humanity. We are therefore resolved not to support any war, either directly or indirectly, and commit ourselves to working for the elimination of its causes."²⁶ In Israel, where there is universal acceptance of the legitimacy of a "defensive war", the sweeping rejection of the use of military force patently constitutes a fierce challenge to mainstream opinion. It is not surprising therefore, that OWRI has never enjoyed public exposure and that the vast majority of Israelis, whatever their political leanings (including leftist factions), are unaware of its existence. Due to the marginality of the organization in both the political and public arenas, as well as the fact that it has undergone a series of splits and resignations (mainly stemming from personal differences), only a small number of its publications are available. The following description of their views in the period under discussion here relies on this limited body of material.²⁷

The first action taken by OWRI immediately after the establishment of the state was an attempt to include in the law of military service the right of conscientious objection. As soon as conscription came under discussion, the organization's secretariat appealed to then-PM and Minister of Defense David Ben-Gurion, and Minister of Justice Pinchas Rosen. In a letter dated 23 June 1949, the latter informed them that when "the military conscription bill is introduced in the Knesset, the issue you raised will be dealt with".²⁸ Their repeated requests to meet with Rosen were rejected, however, and

when they were eventually given an appointment with the deputy minister, they learned that the Knesset was about to conclude its debate of the bill. Furthermore, they were told that the final version would not recognize exemption on the basis of pacifist convictions. When they approached the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, they were informed that it had been decided that any case of conscientious objection would be referred to a special committee appointed by the minister of defense, and would be handled individually.

The legislation that was ultimately enacted did not recognize the right to exemption from military service for male conscientious objectors, although it did offer this option for women. The law was a bitter disappointment for OWRI:

As you know, our movement is based on the individual and on his inner ability and determination to withstand the demanding experience and distress he can expect for remaining loyal to his divine conscience and the supreme inner moral compass which is above human law. We will of course, not desist from our efforts to convince those who decide human fate in Israel to recognize the right to refuse, for reasons of conscience, to serve in the army and aid in any manner to pave the way for the mutual killing known as war.²⁹

With its uncompromising pacifism, OWRI was unwilling to accept the idea of alternative service within the framework of the army. However, they did support alternative community service for those who were granted an exemption from the military because of their refusal to bear arms or wear a uniform, even if they were assigned to non-combat duty (e.g., medic or cook). OWRI thus failed in its attempt to achieve legal recognition of the status of war resister. Nevertheless, in the period following independence, the authorities appear to have adopted a tolerant attitude toward the first conscientious objectors, as suggested by the remark in one of the organization's newsletters: "Nothing is predetermined and each case is handled individually, but in a certain spirit of clemency."³⁰ However, the authorities soon changed their policy and began to come down hard on those who resisted military duty.

Having lost the battle for official recognition of conscientious objection, OWRI sought to achieve a critical mass of youngsters who would refuse to serve in the army by appealing directly to the recruits. They therefore addressed the following words to young men on the eve of conscription:

They will teach you how to thrust a bayonet in the abdomen of another person, how to break his neck with your bare hands. They will train you to aim bombs at targets that may be schools or homes, or even to drop an atom or hydrogen bomb that will wipe out a square mile of settlement and all the life on it . . . If such things horrify you, think of them before you don a uniform, because afterwards they will not allow your conscience to guide your actions . . . A growing number of young men like you have found the answer—they have decided to be conscientious objectors, refusing to serve in the army and bear arms.³¹

When compulsory military service was extended by six months in 1952, the organization responded with understandable displeasure and open criticism:

There does not appear to be any doubt that the goal of the current government is to create for Israel an army whose size is not in proportion to the size of the country and the true extent of the imminent danger from across its borders. . . . This is not to say that what is emerging here is a Prussia of the Middle East or a Jewish Sparta. However, the trend is toward Sparta more than toward Athens.³²

OWRI also warned of the danger of the government's desire to expand the IDF on grounds that the numerical superiority of the Egyptian and Syrian armies would impel Egypt and Syria to enlarge their military forces even more: "Mr. Ben-Gurion on the one hand, and General Nagib, Colonel Shishakli, and perhaps their colleagues from the Arab camp on the other, exploit each other in order to penetrate even more into civilian life . . . with plans to raise bigger and better armies."³³

Along with their fight against compulsory army service for older recruits, OWRI also came out against the Gadna, the army's youth program for high school students, arguing:

The Gadna is a joint project of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Education. In effect, it is the most concrete step taken to instill militarism in the youth, to fulfill the motto of the director of the Department of Education Dr. Ben-Yehuda: "All people of Israel are soldiers."³⁴

Believing firmly, and somewhat naively, in the moral superiority of the human race, as exemplified by children before they are "spoiled" by adults,

the members of OWRI noted that the only voices raised against the compulsory aspect of Gadna came from teenagers: "Only among the youngsters themselves does opposition to this militaristic enslavement break out from time to time . . . These are your educators, Israel. The voice is Jacob's voice but the hands are the hands of Esau!"³⁵

As purists who believed in absolute pacifism, OWRI found it difficult to cooperate with other peace organizations operating in Israel, but which were not anti-militaristic or pacifist in principle. Thus, in 1951, for example, OWRI was asked for its opinion of the Israeli branch of the World Peace Movement, which opposed the development of nuclear weapons in the late 1940s and early '50s.³⁶ The following disqualification appeared in their newsletter:

We relate to every peace movement according to its actions in reality. We understand a peace movement to be a movement in which the members fulfill the undertaking of peace first of all in their own lives by acts of brotherhood to all men and nations and by refusing to take part in anything associated with war, the military, the arms industry, not in peace time and not in war time.³⁷

OWRI did not regard the World Peace Movement as an ally in their fight against warfare of any kind. Nevertheless, on certain issues OWRI displayed an ideological similarity to other organizations. Like Ihud, for example, it denounced the popularity of the IDF and all things military among the Israeli public, a popularity they believed was fanned by deliberate indoctrination on the part of the authorities: "Step by step, in a systematic carefully calculated fashion, the rulers of Israel draw all aspects of life into the magic circle of the army. They speak of the lofty vision of peace of the prophets of Judah and Israel while instituting universal militarization."³⁸

The organization also came out vehemently against the practical measures being taken to imbue the general public with an affinity for militarism. They censured both government actions, including the Independence Day military parade and official publications, and the operations of non-official intermediary entities, such as the media, whose messages were orchestrated to coincide with the government line:

The crowning glory of all this were the Independence Day celebrations, which reached their height with the display of terrible weapons of destruction that were solemnly and blaringly paraded publically through the streets of the cities, and the columns upon columns of handsome lads and charming lasses adorned unashamedly with the latest, lightest, and "easiest to use" instruments

of murder . . . at all times and in every land, the Moloch of militarism chews up and swallows down the best of the nation's resources in body, soul, and property, and its victims believe that this is their salvation!³⁹

As with Ihud, OWRI was firmly opposed to preparations for the “second round” and the Sinai Campaign. Another object of their disapproval was the sale of weapons by the military industries being established in the country at the time: “. . . How great are the spoils of those who trade in human blood in this chaos that has overtaken the citizens of the world who are seized with fear of their brothers!”⁴⁰ Its stance with regard to the subject of nationalism is particularly interesting. Without doubt, it constituted a minority view not only in that period in Israeli history, but even by universal standards:

A nation is not a primary natural unit, as people think, but the result of totally random historical factors, such as some political regime or another which ruled a territory with certain borders, and race and language do not play a significant role in creating nations. . . . State and nation, along with wealth and honor, have become, without justification, ends in and of themselves.⁴¹

With the whole country celebrating Israel's 10th anniversary, the editor of the OWRI newsletter did not hesitate to rain on the nation's parade, coming out against the value held to be the most sacrosanct of all—the sacrifice of the lives of the nation's sons. In reference to the battle at Nebi Yusha, a decade before, he wrote, “The god of the priests of Moloch was placated: the sacrifices were offered, the hill was hallowed in the boys' blood.”⁴² As if this “heresy” were not enough, the newsletter accused the ten-year-old state of grossly deviating from Jewish ethos and practice throughout history:

Ten years ago, Israel turned its back on the sacred tradition of its prophets and sages. The prophets' dire warning, “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts,” and the vow whereby, according to the sages of the Talmud, “the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured Israel that they shall not go up [all together as if surrounded] by a wall” have been replaced by the declaration of the new false prophets: “The state under any condition and for any price” . . . Zion builds its project of rebirth and renewal, focusing all the efforts of the nation on rising militarism, on the Sparta/Esau-like education of its children and youth, on the reverence for physical power and the deification of the army.⁴³

Throughout the years the group offered legal advice and other forms of assistance to young men and women who wished to avoid army service for reasons of pacifism. It appears that by the late 1980s, the IDF granted exemptions—albeit not readily—to several hundred conscientious objectors (OWRI estimates range from 200 to 250⁴⁴), mainly women. Most exemptions were for psychological reasons, although both sides were well aware that this was merely a formal remedy, as their true motive was ideological.

On the fringes of Ihud and OWRI were several people who held even more extreme pacifist views, and worked both within these organizational frameworks and independently to promote their ideals. We focus here on two of them, Nathan Hofshi (Ihud) and Joseph Abilea (OWRI). Notwithstanding their unconventional views on the subject of war and peace, both were “normative” in every other way, including lifestyle and occupation. Moreover, although the public was never swayed by their opinions, they were treated with the utmost tolerance by both society and the authorities. In light of the fact that they were active during the war for national independence and the formative period of the state, such tolerance can in no way be taken for granted.

NATAN HOFSHI

Natan Hofshi (Frankel) was born in 1889 to a religious Zionist family in Poland.⁴⁵ In the wake of the upheaval of the 1905 revolution, Natan moved to Warsaw in 1908, and a year later he and a group of friends made aliya to Palestine. In his new home, Hofshi first joined the left-wing labor party Hapoel Hatzair, but left in 1921 for ideological reasons, believing the group had become “too political.”⁴⁶ While still a member of Hapoel Hatzair, Hofshi came out against Dr. Katzenelson’s article in the movement’s journal “On the Issue of the Hebrew Army”: “I was saddened by the fact that such a military article was given a place in our paper, the paper of a party of laborers, all of whose actions, work, and ambitions should be the total opposite of militarism and everything it entails.”⁴⁷ In his early years in Palestine, Hofshi had no qualms about guarding the settlements in which he lived and worked. Within a short time, however, he adopted an extreme pacifist stance and refused to bear arms, even solely for purposes of guard duty. In a eulogy he wrote on the anniversary of the death of the Jews murdered in a Bedouin attack on Tel Hai, where he had lived for a time and shared in the task of guarding the settlement, he described the process of change he had undergone:

Like stealthy killers we stand in the dark and the silence . . . night after night . . . All day in our home, the settlement houses, we hear the clatter of rifles, handguns, bullets, and other fine things . . . Every now and then I would come to my senses: What is this? Where are we living? . . . And me, is this really me? Who armed me with all these instruments of death, and who are the unseen people at whom I am to aim my bullets?⁴⁸

Objecting to the use of arms and militarism, although many of his friends joined the Haganah, Hofshi refrained. A member of Brit Shalom and Ihud, as well as the driving force behind the founding of OWRI, he defined himself as a “religious-Jewish-pacifist-vegetarian”. With deep ties to Judaism, he attributed primary importance to its mission as “a light unto the nations”, to disseminating the prophets’ moral message of world peace and justice.⁴⁹ He drew his most seminal influence from the spiritual Zionism of Ahad Ha’am.⁵⁰ Hofshi advocated strengthening the ethical/spiritual aspect of Zionism, and consistently opposed the use of physical force to achieve the renewal of the Jewish people in its homeland. Another powerful influence was the “religion of labor” of Aaron David Gordon, whom Hofshi considered the first Zionist leader to correctly perceive the inherent contradiction in Zionism’s attitude toward the Arabs. In addition, clear signs of a Tolstoyan influence can be discerned in Hofshi’s ideology,⁵¹ especially with respect to pacifism and vegetarianism.

In the 1930s, he was one of the few at the time to grasp the problem inherent in the Zionist enterprise from the perspective of the local Arab population.⁵² Although he never wavered in his support for the Zionist project, he continuously sought ways to minimize the friction and display greater understanding of and consideration for Arab rights. He used every opportunity to call for concentrating efforts on finding ways to cooperate with the Arab population; an approach he believed would make it possible to realize the Zionist dream. However, the purist stance against the use of force under any circumstances advocated by Hofshi and the small cadre of absolute pacifists he headed put him in the minority even in Ihud. In reply to Felix Weltsch,⁵³ a member of the group who contended that while it might be morally virtuous to educate for total nonviolence, it did not provide a solution to current problems, Hofshi wrote: “I dare to ask: What would have happened if the Jews had responded with force, with violence, in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and so on? Would their fate not have been a thousand times worse than it is now? In any case—would anything have been better that way, would anything have been saved?”⁵⁴

Consequently, he waged a systematic battle with the heads of the labor movement, who openly supported reinforcement of the Jewish defense force, which they regarded as both a sign of national normalization and the appropriate moral response to the problems of survival that had arisen as the conflict with the Arabs escalated. One of his sparring partners was Yitzhak Tabenkin, who termed war a constant in the life of nations in the past, present, and future.⁵⁵ Children should be educated in light of the real world—a world of war in which no problem is resolved by negotiations, but only by struggle, battle, and warfare.⁵⁶ Hofshi responded, “The role of the school is to educate children from the earliest age to refrain from violence, to despise war which destroys everything, to follow the great Talmudic precept ‘whosoever destroys a single soul . . . scripture imputes [guilt] to him as though he had destroyed a complete world’.”⁵⁷

Hofshi considered the establishment of a Jewish state a tragedy:

Something steely grey, threatening, spreads over the face, the tongue speaks intensely and high-mindedly about the new honor and the new glory of a hero’s death on the battlefield, and you stand idly by with your idle belief from “before the flood” that only through labor and peace can the individual and the community be reborn.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, he continued to assume the role of the prophet preaching at the gates:

The Jewish mother must know and recognize the danger of oblivion awaiting the young generation from the politics of the frog puffing itself up. . . . The Angel of Death gazes greedily at its slaughtered prey with utter confidence, and the mother—in a lone weak voice—prays for an end to war.⁵⁹

Hofshi’s collection of essays, *Lev Va’Nefesh* [Heart and Soul], contains a letter from 1949 that he wrote to a friend who had lost his son in the war and had attacked him for his pacifist views. Hofshi responded:

Common sense dictates that a person who wants to avoid danger and let others defend him—such a person would not disapprove of the army, but on the contrary, would urge others on to militarism and warfare, as many of those who say and write ardent patriotic words have done and are doing, sending young boys to the killing fields. They themselves sit in their offices, live the good life, and are busy persecuting the handful of pacifists who do not wish

to be lambs to the slaughter and who are convinced there is no need for this war . . . How much poison and how much ridicule has been poured on us when we warned against this, when we showed the way to get along with the Arabs without war and without independence!⁶⁰

In a letter to a fellow member of the defunct *Brit Shalom*, Hofshi disparaged of the spiritual erosion he believed had led to the establishment of the state: “Religious Judaism, the prophets, the Jewish people, from the time of the Talmud to this day, are all being harnessed to the chariot of young Jewish militarism, to the service of the Moloch of state.”⁶¹ Such opinions infuriated the Mapai leaders and later the heads of state. In a speech he delivered at a party convention in Ein Harod in 1950, Ben-Gurion attacked Hofshi personally, “I cannot imagine what would happen if Kaukji or some other Arab hooligan really did invade Nahalal and start to slaughter the children there. Would Nathan Hofshi say: No, I’m reading a book by Tolstoy, I cannot shed blood . . .”⁶² Hofshi remained steadfast in his beliefs despite the attacks. Even many years later, he reiterated his argument against the claim that conscientious objectors were draft dodgers: “This sort of philosophizing has only one response: I am a human being. I was born and destined for life like every other human being. War is not my way and not what I do.”

Despite Hofshi’s utter alienation from mainstream Israel, he remained a devoted Zionist and a believer; his deep ties to Judaism led him to pacifism in the spirit of the ethics of the prophets, which he upheld throughout his life. In a letter to the editors of the compilation of essays on draft resisters in Israel,⁶³ he explained his reasons for withdrawing from their project. His foremost reason was what he saw as denial of their national roots:

I had forgotten that you are Jews only by force of “biological necessity” and not out of conscious choice. Our bonds with the Land of Israel are alien to you and so you are alien to the whole array of spiritual ties, to the suffering and struggles steeped in blood for this homeland, and to all the endless efforts in the course of the last two thousand years not to completely lose our connection to this piece of land and to return to it en masse at the first opportunity . . . You understood nothing when I spoke of the Zionism of our great prophets because you did not study them at all or only studied them in a mechanistic manner, without devoting your soul to it.⁶⁴

YOSEF ABILEA

Yosef Abilea was a musician born in Austria in 1915. Unlike Hofshi, Abilea remained in the political periphery throughout his life, remote from government circles and their leaders. He made aliya on his own at a very young age. His father, also a musician, himself became a pacifist during World War I, and developed a personal Zionist vision of a society of equality in the Land of Israel that would be governed by the law of justice in the spirit of the prophets. The rest of Abilea's family arrived in 1926, settling in Haifa, which was then, and remains, a mixed city populated by both Jews and Arabs. A few years later, Abilea was enrolled in the French missionary school in Jaffa, where he studied with Christian Arab children. He claimed that direct contact with his Arab classmates influenced the views he came to adopt regarding the Jewish–Arab conflict and the way to resolve it, or as he later explained when he was tried for refusing to serve in the army: “It is inconceivable for me to kill my classmates.”

The decisive event in shaping Abilea's pacifist thinking occurred in 1936 during the Arab revolt. He and his brother were hiking in Transjordan where they were accosted by a group of Arab villagers who, upon learning they were Jews, prepared to kill the two brothers. As Abilea described in an account he repeated in a variety of venues and contexts, he managed to deter the Jordanians from throwing them into a well and leaving them there to die by not resisting. Instead, he told them that if it was their duty as Muslims and Arabs who supported the revolt, he had no objection to being thrown in the well. He related that his response, along with the offer to share his food with them, allayed the fear that the brothers had malicious intentions and they were allowed to continue on their way. This incident reinforced his conviction that violence breeds violence, whereas nonviolence breeds nonviolence.

In the belief that personal and national conflicts should be resolved only by nonviolent means, Abilea refused to join the Haganah or Jewish Brigades. As a result, he was unable to find employment, and worked in his father's store until he was forced to leave Haifa because of what he described as the pressure exerted by Haganah recruiters on anyone who was fit to serve in the corps but did not wish to. He claimed that he returned to the city in 1944 after the British authorities put a stop to these recruitment efforts when a resister was beaten to death by Jews sent by the Yishuv leadership. In Haifa he took part in Jewish–Arab musical enterprises, increasing his objection to the use of force against them.

In contrast to common conceptions about pacifists in general, and those in Israel in particular, Abilea was in no way a “leftist”. For many years he considered himself an advocate of an almost Jabotinsky-like “greater Israel”. The political solution he championed throughout his life was an Israeli–Jordanian confederation. His support for this model for the union between the two banks of the Jordan estranged him from the members of Brit Shalom⁶⁵ and Ihud. For Abilea, the Indian War of Independence led by Gandhi on the principle of nonviolent resistance was the appropriate model for liberating the Land of Israel from the British and establishing the confederation he dreamed. His name featured in the headlines of the Hebrew press in the summer of 1947, when he sent a memorandum to the UN Special Committee on Palestine warning that only by annexation to Jordan under what he termed the enlightened rule of King Abdullah could war between the Arabs and Jews be prevented. As history shows, his proposal was not adopted by the committee, which recommended partition of the region into two states, Jewish and Arab. The declaration of the State of Israel on no more than a small portion of the historical Land of Israel was a deep disappointment to Abilea. He also feared the moral and political ramifications of relying on the force of arms to defend against Arab hostility. He regarded these consequences as graver than the danger of a full-scale Arab attack, which he perceived largely as a response to Jewish actions, rather than as evidence of a heinous Arab plan to annihilate the Jews returning to their homeland.

When Abilea received his draft notice in 1948, at the age of 33, he refused to join the IDF and was tried for resisting the draft. According to his biography,⁶⁶ he read out a speech in his defense which began with the fundamental question inherent in the trial: “How can I stand by when the whole nation has been in danger from the moment of its birth, and when others are dying so that I can live in security?” He replied to this question by describing at length his world view, a combination of “Ghandiism without nationalism” and Albert Schweitzer’s philosophy of reverence for life. He spoke of music and nature which filled his senses and caused him to resist the very idea of war, and gave an account of his many travels throughout the country, which had brought him closer to its Arab population and distanced him from mainstream Zionism. “I cannot take part in hostile acts against people who to my mind are part of my nation and my land,” concluded Israel’s first conscientious objector.⁶⁷

The prosecutor, apparently unmoved by this emotional speech, argued that Abilea was a draft evader who enjoyed the services of the state and the security afforded him by other people who guarded its gates. He asked the

court to deal with him as harshly as permissible by law as a deterrent to others. The verdict was brief. The court condemned Abilea's refusal to do his part for the national effort by performing duties that did not require the use of force and did not offend "his conscience" (quotation marks in the original) at a time when the nation was fighting for its life. "It is only due to the heroism of our fighters and soldiers that the defendant, his wife, his children, and he himself can conduct a normal life here in the current situation," the court declared. Despite these harsh words, the court determined that given the small number of conscientious objectors, it could afford to be tolerant toward a few misguided and wrong-minded individuals. Abilea was ordered to pay a fine of 50 liras, which would be set aside if he reported to the army induction base within one week and made himself available for non-combat duty, such as hospital aide and essential auxiliary services. Abilea rejected the compromise, comparing a soldier on non-combat duty to "a look-out whose function is to warn a thief that the police are coming". He explained that were he given the job of communications operator, his conscience would not allow him to transmit any message that might lead to violence. The court therefore sent him for a medical review. After he had undergone a series of examinations, the chief doctor on the review board took one look at him and without even bothering to read the medical reports, stamped his form "Unfit for Duty". Abilea threw the form in the trash. The army left him alone until 1956, when he was found fit for duty and it was agreed that he would be assigned to a civilian post. After several deferments, however, he reached the age when he could no longer be called up for reserve duty.⁶⁸

Abilea continued to write and publish his views, remained in close personal contact with Hofshi, and was active in OWRI. Although his ideas made no impression whatsoever in Israel, he acquired a certain notice and quite a few supporters abroad, particularly in Europe. Many of them were in Germany, where he spent the last years of his life.

CONCLUSION

Without doubt, the pacifist and anti-militarist viewpoints described here were marginal in ideological terms, as well as in social/political terms, both preceding and following Israeli independence. Moreover, their influence on public discourse regarding the character of the state and the means for ensuring its security was negligible at best. Yet in light of the current debate in Israel over the place of the military in the country's value system and

political decision making, it is worth resurrecting these views from obscurity in the nation's collective memory. The public discourse might benefit from knowing that as early as the mid-20th century there were those who warned of the danger of aggrandizing and relying on military force. At the earliest, critical stage in the nation's history, these people displayed awareness of the risks of placing too much emphasis on military power and the implications of this mentality for the chances of reaching a compromise solution. Knowledge of these groups and individuals may also be of value to those who are now questioning the viability of preserving and promoting the ethical Jewish character of the Zionist project and creating a balanced system of national priorities.

On a different level, the cases of Ihud, OWRI, Hofshi, and Abilea reveal the complexity of relations between the ideological mainstream and periphery in the Yishuv. On the one hand, they illustrate a commendable degree of tolerance for unconventional opinions on the part of the Jewish Israeli collective.⁶⁹ On the other hand, these cases demonstrate the inherent pernicious nature of the central national ethos, which casts its opponents as irrelevant and relegates them to oblivion. In this respect, we might do well to model ourselves on the Talmud, which Hofshi and others often referred to as the spiritual wellspring from which the Jewish state should drink. The Talmudic scholars chose to present us with not only the majority opinion or the final decision but also to systematically include in the text the minority or lone opinion that was not ultimately accepted, thereby consecrating the value of constructive debate.

NOTES

(All sources in Hebrew except notes 63, 66, 67, and 69.)

1. An exception to this rule is the New Profile movement founded in 1998, which has a feminist anti-militaristic (although not necessarily pacifist) agenda. However, there is very little public awareness of the movement, and consequently, its influence on public discourse is negligible.

2. Tamar Hermann, "From Brit Shalom to Peace Now: Pragmatic Pacifism of the Peace Camp in Israel" (PhD diss., Tel-Aviv University, 1989) 104–6.

3. Mordechai Breuer, "The Religious Camp and the Struggle for Peace, *Baiyot Benleumiyot* (1978) 6–10.

4. Yoram Peri, "Society Army Relations in Israel in Crisis," *Megamot*, 39 (1999) 375–99.

5. Yoram Peri and Amnon Neubach, *The Military Industrial Fabric in Israel* (Tel-Aviv, 1984).

6. Uri Ben-Eliezer, "Military Society and Civilian Society in Israel," in *In the Name of Security: Sociology of War and Peace in a Changing Age*, ed. Uri Ben Eliezer and Majid Al-Haj (Haifa, 2003) 29–76; Yagil Levy, *From an Army of the Nation to an Army of the Peripheries* (Jerusalem, 2007).

7. Avner Ben-Amos and Ilana Bet El, "Education for Militarism and Commemoration: National Memorial Ceremonies in Schools in Israel," in Ben-Eliezer and Al-Haj, *In the Name of Security*, 369–400.

8. Reuven Pedhazor, "The Israeli Culture of Security—Its Sources and Influences on Israeli Democracy," *Politika*, 10 (2003) 87–117.

9. Hagit Gur, ed. *Militarism in Education* (Tel-Aviv, 2005); Hanna Herzog, "The Fighting Family: The Influence of the Israeli-Arab Conflict on the Status of Women in Israel," in Ben-Eliezer and Al-Haj, *In the Name of Security*, 410–21.

10. Yosef Heller, *From Brit Shalom to Ihud—Judah Leib Magnes and the Struggle for a Bi-national State* (Jerusalem, 2003).

11. David Ben-Gurion, *Uniqueness and Destiny—Remarks on Israeli Security* (Tel-Aviv, 1980).

12. Shmuel Sandler, "Conscientious Objection in Israel—A General Review," *Haroveh Hashavoor*, 58 (1993) 1–2.

13. Uri Davis, *Crossing the Border: A Political Autobiography* (Tel-Aviv, 1994).

14. Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, P3/2565.

15. *Baiyot Ha'zman*, January 1948.

16. "The Spirit of Masada—On Real and Fake Symbols," *Baiyot Ha'zman*, 22 April 1948.

17. Magnes was a confirmed pacifist. In the 1920s he wrote of the idea of militarism and Judaism: "I would hope, for example, that the Jewish people would decide with a clear mind that it is adamantly opposed to any form of organized warfare . . . I would like for the time to come when the Jewish people, or at least major portions of the nation, would cry out: We will not go to battle, we will not let our sons and daughters go out to kill and be killed" (Yehuda L. Magnes, *Like All Other Nations* (Jerusalem, 1922) 22.

18. In the same letter to the editor, Magnes claimed that the incident was the writing on the wall that should not be ignored. He went on to call on the UN Security Council to immediately impose a settlement on both sides.

19. Shimon Budenheimer, cited in *Baiyot Ha'zman*, 22 April 1948.

20. Gabriel Stern, "The State of Israel in the East," *Baiyot Ha'zman*, 27 May 1948.

21. Abraham Lisenboder, "On Assessment of the Conquests," *Baiyot Ha'zman*, 6 August 1984.

22. Yehoshua Radler-Feldman, "On the Second Round," *Ner*, April 1950.

23. "Our conscience Cries Out!" *Ner*, Nov. 1953–Jan. 1954.

24. Radler-Feldman, "Kfar Kassem at the Gates of the Knesset," *Ner*, Nov.–Dec. 1956.

25. Known today as the Organization of War Resisters in Israel, when founded it was dubbed the War Resisters Movement. It was later changed to the Movement of War Resisters in Israel.

26. OWRI (Organization of War Resisters in Israel), *Newsletter*, 3 (1950) 1.

27. I am deeply grateful to Amos Gwartz, a longstanding peace activist and pacifist, who made available to me the OWRI newsletters, as well as extensive correspondence between Natan Hofshi and Yosef Abilea.

28. OWRI, *Newsletter*, 1950, 2.

29. *Ibid.*, 5.

30. OWRI, *Newsletter*, 2 (1951) 12.

31. OWRI, *Newsletter*, 3 (1952) 2–3.

32. *Ibid.*, 12.

33. OWRI, *Newsletter*, 4 (1953) 12.

34. *Ibid.*, 7.

35. *Idem.*

36. Hermann, “From Brit Shalom to Peace Now,” 230–57.

37. OWRI, *Newsletter*, (1951) 13.

38. OWRI, *Newsletter*, (1952) 17.

39. *Ibid.*, 19.

40. OWRI, *Newsletter*, 6 (1956) 16.

41. *Ibid.*, 22.

42. OWRI, *Newsletter*, 7 (1958) 7.

43. *Ibid.*, 2.

44. Interview with Toma Shick, who served for several terms as its secretary (January 1987).

45. Gerald Kressel, “Natan Hofshi: Autobiography,” *Besha’ar*, 33.2 (1980) 118–22.

46. In honor of his 75th birthday, Hofshi’s friends and supporters published a collection of his essays. Natan Hofshi, *Heart and Soul: In a Struggle for Nation and Man* (Tel-Aviv, 1965) 37.

47. *Ibid.*, 40.

48. *Ibid.*, 44.

49. In the introduction Hofshi expressed his disappointment with the character the Zionist enterprise had acquired: “Sober materialism and the faith in force that have permeated deeper and deeper into our country and taken over the small and the great demand that we sneer at the bold, idle/childish, dream of turning the conception of our visionaries into the way of life of our people in our land, and every legitimate and illegitimate means is used in the attempt to be like ‘a regular nation’.” Natan Hofshi, *From the Light of Judaism* (Rishpon, 1964 [1933]) 8.

50. Ahad Ha’am, *At the Crossroads* (Jerusalem, 1955).

51. On the 23rd anniversary of Tolstoy’s death, Hofshi wrote, “These years have taught us a long bitter lesson. We have suffered all the troubles and horrors of which the prophet of truth and love warned us. Humankind has not listened to the great teacher and educator and has not chosen the way of life he showed

us. Consequently, life has become a massive despicable slaughterhouse.” (Hofshi, *From the Light of Judaism*, 58)

52. Natan Hofshi, ed. *From the Light in Judaism—Remarks of the Sages on Jewish Values and its Way of Life* (Rishpon, 1955).

53. Felix Weltch, “More on the Issues of Violence,” *Baiyot Ha’yom*, July–August 1942.

54. Natan Hofshi, “A Response to a Response,” *Baiyot Ha’yom*, July–August 1942.

55. Yitzhak Tabenkin, “The School and the War” (address at a convention of kibbutz teachers and child-carers, Kibbutz Yagur, August 1942), *Shdemot*, 34 (1972) 88–93.

56. Eyal Kafkafi, *Truth or Faith: Tabenkin An Educator of Pioneers* (Jerusalem, 1992) 54.

57. Natan Hofshi, “On Problems of Education in Times of Emergency,” (1943). Reply to Tabenkin, by *Tlamin*, Nahalal, Movement of the Moshavim.

58. Natan Hofshi, “Eliminating War—How?,” *Baiyot Ha’zman*, 27 August 1948.

59. *Idem*.

60. Hofshi, *Heart and Soul*, 237.

61. *Ibid.*, 236.

62. David Ben-Gurion, “On War and on Immigrant Absorption,” *Ner*, 28 April 1950.

63. Martin Blatt, Uri Davis, and Paul Kleinbaum, eds. *Dissent and Ideology in Israel—Resistance to the Draft, 1948–1973* (London, 1975).

64. *Ibid.*, 30.

65. Aharon Kedar, “The History of Brit Shalom in the Years 1925–1928,” in *Chapters in Zionist Research and Policy* (Jerusalem, 1976) 224–85.

66. Anthony Bing, *Israeli Pacifist: The Life of Yosef Abilea* (Syracuse, 1990).

67. Abilea, cited in Blatt, Davis, and Kleinbaum, *Dissent and Ideology in Israel*, 1975, 49–51.

68. Akiva Eldar, “The First Israeli Conscientious Objector,” *Ha’aretz*, 22 July 2005.

69. Nils Gleditsch, review of *Israeli Pacifist the Life of Yosef Abilea*, by Anthony G. Bing, *Journal of Peace Research*, 30.3 (1993) 358.